
GREAT BRITAIN'S FOREIGN POLICY AND IRAN'S NUCLEAR PROGRAM

Makhir KHALIFA-ZADE

*Political scientist,
coworker at the International Academy of Ecological Energy
(Baku, Azerbaijan)*

I n t r o d u c t i o n

The United States has been keeping a keen watch on Iran's nuclear research since the beginning of the 1990s. In so doing, Washington is claiming that under the cover of a national peaceful nuclear energy program, Tehran is steadily moving toward creating its own arsenal of nuclear weapons. As early as 1996, in response to the growing suspicions about the existence of such a program in Iran, U.S. Congress adopted the Iran-Libya Sanctions Act which envisages the introduction of harsh measures against foreign companies

investing more than 20 million dollars in Iran's energy sector. But after the terrorist attack on the United States in September 2001 and Iran's blacklisting as a country sponsoring terrorism, the White House toughened up its policy against Tehran even more, striving to put a complete stop to research under its nuclear program. In this respect, based on the fact that Great Britain is the U.S.'s key ally in its global policy, it is expedient to take a look at official London's foreign policy approaches both toward Tehran's nuclear program and toward Iran on the whole.

Research Sources in Iran's Atomic Energy Sphere

Iran's political elite began thinking about organizing research in this sphere back during the rule of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi. This pragmatic head of state set about targeted modernization of

the country, acquired modern technology, and created new branches of industry, that is, he steered a course toward forming Iran's industrial, technological, and intellectual might. For example, as early as 1959, he acquired a 5-megawatt reactor from the United States for carrying out his first research work on nuclear energy. The shah essentially planned to build 23 atomic power plants before 1990. But according to experts from the Congressional Research Service, there is no evidence supporting the fact that Iran began creating its own nuclear weapons as early as the reign of the shah.¹

After the end of the Iranian-Iraqi war of 1980-1988, Tehran renewed its work on the nuclear program on the initiative of the country's president, Hashemi Rafsanjani, whom the U.S. believes to be the father of the Iranian nuclear armament program. In particular, it insisted on Germany's Kraftwerke Union A.G., a joint Siemens and Telefunken venture, completing the construction of an atomic power plant in Bushehr, which began under the shah in 1974. It should be noted that the planned capacity of its two reactors was 1,200 megawatts each, and the total cost of the contract with this German company amounted to 4-6 billion dollars.² But under powerful pressure from the U.S., which suspected Iran of carrying out secret work to create its own nuclear weapons, the German company refused to renew the contract. Based on this, in January 1995, the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran signed a document with the Russian Federation Ministry of Atomic Energy on completion by the Russian side of startup-setup operations at the atomic power plant in Bushehr.

In 2002, the National Council of Resistance of Iran provided information that the country's leadership was organizing secret work in the atomic sphere at the Natanz underground nuclear center, a factory for the enrichment of uranium. And in 2004, a scandal broke out relating to the fact that in 1980-1990, Pakistani physicist Abdul Kadir Khan was providing Iran with information on enriching uranium and other materials for research in the atomic sphere. At that time (2004), official Tehran announced its plans to build several atomic power plants in the next 20 years, the total capacity of which would amount to as much as 6,000 MW. What is more, the country's administration repeatedly stated that it was not conducting research to create nuclear weapons.³ But the United States continued to maintain that Iran was carrying out this work and demanded that it be prohibited.

Official London's Overall Approach to Tehran

It should be noted that British experts view the United Kingdom's policy toward Iran in the context of the country's overall strategy in the Middle East. And in recent decades, according to specialists, British policy is functioning as a bridge between the United States and the European Union, which is naturally having an effect on London's relations with the Middle Eastern countries. The same experts

¹ See: *Iran's Nuclear Program: Recent Developments*, Congressional Research Service, The Library of Congress, 2 March, 2004.

² See: A. Ommani, "U.S. Foreign Policy Toward Iran and Iran's Nuclear Program," American-Iranian Friendship Committee, 20 June, 2005 [www.swans.com]; A. Koch, J. Wolf, *Iran's Nuclear Facilities: a Profile*, Center for Nonproliferation Studies, 1998; "Iran's Nuclear Program" [http://irans-nuclear-program.brainsip.com].

³ See: "Iran Denies It's Building Nuclear Bomb," Associated Press, 7 August, 2003; Statement by Mr. G. Ali Khoshroo, Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister for Legal and International Affairs, Second Session of the Prepcom for the 2005 NPT Review Conference, 29 April, 2003.

are critical of this strategy and believe that Great Britain should be mainly oriented toward Europe and consequently act on the international arena as a member of the European Union.⁴ Incidentally, it is noted that Great Britain essentially has the same interests as the other Western states in Iran and the other Middle Eastern countries: ensuring continuous deliveries of oil to their markets; fighting radical political forces and intercepting threats posed by them both to regional stability and to stability in Great Britain itself; fighting terrorism; and preventing the spread of weapons of mass destruction and their components. What is more, according to British experts, Great Britain has significant commercial interests in the region relating to the sale of state-of-the-art weapons systems to its countries. But based on mid- and longer-term prospects, the significance of this factor in official London's policy will most likely decline.

On the whole though, in relation to Iran and other Middle Eastern countries, British experts note two approaches in the United Kingdom's policy—diplomatic and strategic.⁵ The diplomatic approach is aimed at maintaining good relations with the current regimes, as well as with the political forces which could potentially come to power, thus making it possible to avoid a possible confrontation with them in the future. This approach, like the need to carry out a policy oriented more toward Europe, has many supporters in the Foreign Office and in the leftist wing of the Labor Party and Liberal Democrats. While the strategic approach, according to the same experts, is focused on potential military, political, and ideological threats coming from the region's countries and consequently on the possibilities for smoothing out or opposing these threats. The aggressive anti-Western governments of the region's countries are viewed as such, and consequently in relations with them a policy of containment is recommended. Both this approach and the pro-American foreign policy of the United Kingdom as a whole are supported by the Prime Minister's administration and in certain circles of the Labor and Conservative parties.

As directly concerns Iran's nuclear program, Great Britain's political community is of the opinion that this country needs nuclear energy to meet its growing energy needs, in particular to preserve its non-renewable resources of oil and gas, that is, the main commodities of Iranian export. But, according to British experts, the question nevertheless arises of why a country with the richest supplies of oil and natural gas in the world is stubbornly developing a nuclear program, the goal of which, as it states, is to meet its energy needs.⁶

Main Trends

In contrast to the U.S., Great Britain had rather good relations with Iran at one time, even though the U.K. tended strongly toward America in its foreign policy. For example, in the mid-1990s, London supported the conception put forward by the European Union of establishing a "critical dialog" with Tehran on its nuclear program. In 2002-2003, British Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (colloquially called the Foreign Secretary) Jack Straw made several visits to Tehran, during which he characterized Iran's political regime as a nascent democracy. What is more, Jack Straw underlined the presence of good bilateral cooperation and called for a constructive approach in this sphere. In other words, London's relatively "soft" approach toward Tehran contrasted sharply with Washington's hard-line policy in this area.

⁴ See: J. Rynhold, "British Policy Toward the Middle East," BESA Perspectives, No. 11, 7 November, 2005 [www.biu.ac.il].

⁵ Ibidem.

⁶ See: "Campaign For Nuclear Disarmament, Iran and the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty," July 2003, CND Briefing, London [www.cnduk.org].

This “softness” could have been caused by the fact that recently, particularly since the beginning of the joint military operation with the U.S. in Iraq, people in Great Britain have begun increasingly expressing their displeasure with the leadership’s unconditional support of the United State’s foreign policy steps. In particular, Jeremy Corbyn, a Labor MP from the House of Commons, sent the heads of the parliamentary house a written inquiry asking them to “declare some independence in our foreign policy rather than following George Bush from war to war.” *The Guardian* published an editorial article at the same time in which Tony Blair was blamed for the deterioration in relations between Iran and Great Britain. As for the above-mentioned inquiry, British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw reiterated that the U.K. government still disagrees with the U.S. hostile policy toward Iran despite its closeness with the Bush Administration.⁷

Some experts noted that Great Britain even asked the United States to leave Iran alone. On this account, Jack Straw noted that his country would not interfere in Iran’s internal affairs, emphasizing that official London’s policy in this area differs from the American and warned Washington from interfering in Iran’s internal affairs, explaining that the Iranians should sort out their domestic policy problems themselves.⁸

In September 2003, a discussion was held in the British parliament regarding London’s policy toward Tehran, during which Sir Teddy Taylor (a Conservative Member of the House of Commons) said that it was a “huge error” to have negative relations with Iran. “Iran,” he said, “is one of the most sensible countries in the Middle East.” In response to this statement, Foreign Office Minister Chris Mullin “decoded” official London’s foreign political approach toward Tehran, including toward its nuclear program. For example, according to the Foreign Office Minister, there is no doubt that Iran is a country of growing international importance, and he described the British government’s policy toward Iran as pursuing a “constructive and when necessary critical engagement.” He cited cooperation in such areas as the fight against drugs, the restoration of Afghanistan, and in efforts to stabilize Iraq. What is more, Chris Mullin said that the United Kingdom supported Khatami’s reformist regime aimed at building a civil society based upon the rule of law. But he added that it would be wrong not to set out concerns about Iran, specifying there were worries about human rights, support for terrorist groups, the development of weapons of mass destruction, and Iran’s nuclear program. What is more, the Foreign Office representative denied that Tony Blair’s government was divided over the U.K.’s policy toward Iran.⁹

Official London’s distancing from Washington’s approaches to Tehran and its nuclear program was also discussed in November 2004, when British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw, talking about the United States’ possible military campaign against Iran, stressed that he could not imagine any circumstances “which would justify military measures against Iran. The United Kingdom would not support such a policy, if there ever were such a policy.”¹⁰ It is very likely that these words were also prompted by the severe criticism in the country of the activity of Tony Blair’s cabinet due to his “attachment” to U. S. policy, that is, the Foreign Office wanted to demonstrate again its independence from Washington.

What is more, it is possible that in this way, the British Foreign Office was trying to emphasize not only its independence, but also its particular orientation toward Europe. We will remind you that at that time the European capitals, primarily Paris and Berlin, criticized the American and British military operation in Iraq, as well as America’s approach toward Iran’s nuclear program and

⁷ See: “Straw Reiterates U.K. Disagreement with U.S. Policy toward Iran,” *Payvand’s Iran News*, 9 September, 2003 [www.payvand.com/news/03/sep/1048.html].

⁸ See: *News*, 17 June, 2003 [www.lenta.ru].

⁹ See: “U.K. Denies Divided Policy on Iran,” IRNA, 18 September, 2003 [www.globalsecurity.org].

¹⁰ P. Schwarz, “Europe Alarmed by U.S. Threats against Iran,” 25 January, 2005, World Socialist Web Site [www.wsws.org].

toward official Tehran on the whole. Consequently, it is entirely possible that Great Britain was also showing its particular orientation toward Europe in its participation in the work of the so-called troika (EU3) which is holding talks on behalf of the European Union with Iran regarding the halting of its nuclear program.

This evaluation of London's policy is perhaps also confirmed by the fact that as early as June 2003, former British Secretary of State Robin Cook, when characterizing London's approach toward Tehran, said that the blind hate of the American administration headed by George Bush for Iran has weakened the reformers and done the religious conservatives a favor. British policy toward Iran should be aimed at supporting the reformers headed by Khatami. This will be both in our interests, and in the interests of the Iranians. This time we should make the White House understand that we do not intend to subordinate the interests of the British nation to the interests of the United States, which is oriented toward a policy of confrontation. Iran cannot become another Iraq.¹¹

After a representative of the conservative wing of its political elite, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, came to power in Iran as a result of the presidential election in June 2005, as well as with respect to the decisions of the IRI government in January 2006 to remove the IAEA seals from some of the uranium-enriching equipment at the Natanz nuclear center in effect since 2004 and since modernization of this center began, a tendency toward rapprochement with Washington's hard line has been designated in official London's approaches toward Tehran. What is more, it is possible that victory of a hard-line supporter at the presidential election in Iran meant that the West's hopes for evolution of the political regime in Tehran were crushed to a certain extent.

For example, in an information broadcast by the BBC in January 2005, it was noted that while the U.S. is stubbornly insisting on discussion of the sanctions against Iran at the U.N. Security Council meetings, and is even threatening it with a military campaign, British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw spoke out in support of a carefully considered approach, saying that there is no need to hastily introduce such sanctions.¹² What is more, according to the results of the talks held in Washington, also in January 2005, Jack Straw said that despite the fact that the U.S. supports the idea of carrying out a military campaign against Iran, this question was not even discussed during these talks. Here it is pertinent to note that at this time the Foreign Office prepared a 200-page report, which reviewed the possible actions of the U.S. and EU with respect to Iran's nuclear program, in particular those rejecting any military campaign against official Tehran and recommending establishing talks with it.¹³

But the severe statements of the new Iranian president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, addressed to Israel, the U.S., and the West as a whole, in our opinion, essentially buried any hopes, at least for some time, of softening the political regime in Tehran, which also led to a toughening up of London's policy. In this respect, it should be noted that possibly with the aim of provoking a domestic political struggle in Iran and to strengthen the opposition to its current regime, in October 2005, more than 50% of the members of the House of Commons asked the British government to conduct a more adequate policy toward the clerical authorities of this country. In particular, a press release of the British Parliamentary Committee for Iran Freedom, prepared on 13 December, 2005 regarding this initiative, noted the need to remove the terror label from the Mojahedin-e Khalq, the People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran (PMOI), and the restrictions on its activity in Great Britain.¹⁴

¹¹ See: "Robin Cook: So where are the Weapons?" *El Pais* (Spain), 6 June, 2003 [<http://www.inosmi.ru/print/183096.html>].

¹² BBC News, 25 January, 2006.

¹³ See: "U.S.: British Foreign Secretary Says U.S. Committed To Diplomatic Approach Toward Iran," Radio Free Europe Liberty, 25 January, 2005 [www.rferl.org].

¹⁴ See: "The British Parliamentary Committee for Iran Freedom," Press Release, 13 December, 2005 [www.ncr-iran.org].

This initiative was also supported by the House of Lords, which came forward with a corresponding address to the government on 31 January, 2006.¹⁵ (We will note that before the 1979 revolution, Mojahedin-e Khalq conducted an anti-Western policy. But after Shah Mohamed Reza Pahlavi was forced to leave the country, it began organizing terrorist acts against the clerical regime in Iran.¹⁶)

In this way, according to British experts from the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), after revival by the new IRI political leadership of work at the Natanz center, Tony Blair's government has decided to use "more stick and less carrot" in its relations with Iran. For example, during the debate on the Iranian nuclear program held in the British parliament in October 2005, the Foreign Office's Middle East Minister Kim Howells responded to calls from members of parliament for a tougher policy toward Iran with a cryptic message suggesting that "the government is no longer quite as certain that it will never strike Iran's nuclear facilities."¹⁷

Nevertheless, at the meeting held in London of members of the U.N. Security Council and Germany on 31 January, 2006, an agreement was reached to submit Iran's nuclear dossier to the U.N. Security Council for review, taking into account Russia's proposal to put off any action by the Security Council until March of this year.¹⁸ And on the outcome of this meeting, British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw announced that the U.N. Security Council would not take any measures until March, when the IAEA was due to present it with a detailed report on Iran.

According to the British newspaper *The Guardian*, the U.N. Security Council could adopt a resolution envisaging extremely serious measures—from the application of sanctions to the use of force against Iran. But, the newspaper believes, it is very likely that the Security Council will propose that the IAEA continue monitoring Tehran's nuclear program while simultaneously demanding that it stop work on its uranium enrichment activities and proposing that talks be renewed.¹⁹

Brief Conclusions

According to the British newspaper *Financial Times*, Iran's nuclear policy is supported by ultra-conservative Ali Khamenei, who is the highest official making decisions on this program,²⁰ and official Tehran needs nuclear potential to achieve its far-reaching and broad-ranged strategic interests. In this respect, it can be presumed that Iran will continue steering its current course: skillfully maneuvering, playing for time, and balancing, in so doing, on the differences in strategic interests among the U.S., EU, Russian Federation, China, and the Islamic world. There is no doubt that possessing its own nuclear potential will raise Iran to an entirely different level of regional and global policy. Consequently, it will look for new opportunities to continue work on its nuclear program, in which it has already invested billions of dollars.

According to the Israeli newspaper *The Jerusalem Post*,²¹ in the next 1.5-2 years, Iran will create its own atomic bomb, although officially it will deny this, stating that it has no such intentions. At the same time, Tehran announced its plans to build seven atomic power plants before 2025.²²

¹⁵ See: "Iran: UK Parliamentarians, Jurists Call for De-proscription of PMOI," 31 January, 2006 [www.ncr-iran.org].

¹⁶ See: Mojahedin-e Khalq Organization. Country Report on Terrorism. United States Department of State, April 2005.

¹⁷ "Blair's New Tune on Iran," *Iran Focus*, 22 October, 2005 [www.iranfocus.com].

¹⁸ This article was submitted to the editorial board at the end of February 2006.

¹⁹ See: "Iran Nuclear Crisis Sent to Security Council," *The Guardian*, 1 February, 2006.

²⁰ See: "Crude Calculation: Why Oil-Rich Iran Believes the West Will Yield to Nuclear Brinkmanship," *Financial Times*, 2 February, 2006.

²¹ See: "Putin's Plan for Conflict with Iran," *The Jerusalem Post*, 31 January, 2006 [www.jpost.com].

²² See: *Iran's Nuclear Program: Recent Developments*, Congressional Research Service, The Library of Congress, 23 November, 2005.

As for Great Britain's further relations with Iran, including with respect to Tehran's nuclear program, it is possible that despite its close relations with Washington, London will keep a certain distance from the U.S. But it is very possible that the United States and Great Britain will exert maximum efforts to activate the opposition functioning in Iran and to support the immigrant circles acting outside the country against the regime inside it.
